

## The Author of Our Salvation John 3:1-17

There are many characters in the Gospels that help to teach us something about the kingdom of God. I'm sure that you have always been taught that everything in the Scriptures is there for a purpose and if you have been listening to sermons and the teachings of your pastors you know that you can learn something from every event, every teaching opportunity and every passage of the Scriptures. Sometimes the more unusual and interesting characters provide you with the most profound and important bits of Scriptural wisdom. We have a good example of that in the Gospel lesson for today. When you think about Nicodemus, you have to agree that he is one of the most unusual characters that we meet in the Gospels. He is a man of contrasts and his contact with Jesus produced for us one of the most significant passages in the Bible.

Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin. When you think about the events of Jesus' suffering and death, you will remember that the Sanhedrin played a role in having Jesus put to death. That a member of the Sanhedrin would come to Jesus to learn more about his teaching was very unusual. Perhaps he was touched by Jesus' words, perhaps he heard or witnessed a miraculous sign, perhaps he had just heard about Jesus from talk on the street. The fact that he came by night might tell us that Nicodemus considered that coming to see Jesus personally was a risky thing to do. His position on the Sanhedrin and his reputation among his fellow Pharisees would be compromised if it became known that he was actually a follower of the One they were openly opposing. Nicodemus was certainly unusual. He was not willing to be bound by the wave of opposition by his peers to this rabbi from Nazareth. At the same time he was not willing to be open about his interest in Jesus and therefore he came to Jesus at night.

He may seem unusual to us in comparison to some of the other characters we meet in the Gospels. Most were either all for Jesus or all against Him. For the most part the leaders of the Jews were against Jesus, while the disciples, with a few exceptions, were for Jesus. I have to admit that this is a very simplistic way of looking at what is described in the Gospels. Realistically there were believers who had their doubts. Some had a completely different reason for following Jesus. They hoped that He would set up a revolutionary force and defeat the Romans and set up a new kingdom like the good old days under David. Some followed Jesus as long as His teaching agreed with their religious views. When they did not agree with Him they turned their backs and walked away. When His teaching criticized the religious establishment, the leaders plotted to get rid of Him.

It can be difficult to understand and accept someone's teaching when it goes against your fundamental beliefs and practices. There was some of that feeling in Nicodemus. You can see that in the questions and comments that he made in response to some of the things that Jesus said. He didn't understand what Jesus meant by being born again. He didn't understand the renewal of the heart that comes through the miracle of water and the Spirit. His view of his relationship to God was based on human wisdom and works as they had been passed down for many generations.

Many like Nicodemus were comfortable with a religion that they could understand and that made sense to the human mind. Follow the rule and rituals and God will be pleased and all will be well with the world. Does that sound familiar? It should because it describes the religious mindset of many people in our world today. Do the right things and try to follow the rules and

God will be pleased with your good effort and reward you in the sweet by and by. It sounds good and logical, but as Pastor Mark said last week, it is just another trick of the devil go get you to fall away from the truth.

That is where Jesus was going in His discussion with Nicodemus. He was leading Nicodemus to see beyond earthly things and instead see the heavenly things. Heavenly things come from one who has come from heaven, namely Himself. God's wisdom is not the same as man's wisdom. For example, Jesus referred to the example of how Moses was directed to bring healing to the people when they were being bitten by poisonous snakes. In verse 14, we hear these words, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." Who would think that looking up to a bronze snake on a pole would bring healing? But it did! Jesus was hinting at God's great plan for the salvation of the world. The Son of Man must be lifted up that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life. That in itself sounds amazing. But that was just the lead-in to what Jesus would say next. The next words that Jesus spoke have become one of the most important and well-known verses in the Bible. Martin Luther called it the "Little Bible." It is the Gospel in the Gospel. You may have heard it called the "Gospel in a Nutshell." I'm sure most of you could say it with me, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." As wonderful as those words are by themselves, to really appreciate what Jesus was saying we have to remember the context in which they were spoken. Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a skeptic, a searcher. Works righteousness had been his way of life. Keeping the traditions of the people was very important to him. Yet he wanted to know more and Jesus told him the truth.

In contrast to the works-oriented religion that had developed over the years among the Jews, Jesus was presenting to Nicodemus God's plan. The statement that Jesus made starts with God. He is the author of our salvation. God loved the world. His action is based on His love. His love led to action. He gave His only Son. That Son would be lifted up. It didn't make sense to the human mind that the Son of God would be lifted up, in this case, be lifted up on a cross to give His life so that whoever believed in Him may have eternal life. It is God's plan and God's action. It doesn't start with our works. It starts with his love and the action that grew out of that love.

The blessing of that love and action becomes ours, as Jesus said, by believing in Him. But how can simple human beings believe in something that is beyond human reason? A lot of people have struggled with that question down through the years. Many people struggle with that question today. Jesus had the answer to that as well and He shared that with Nicodemus right at the beginning of their chat. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Remember that Jesus spoke about being born of water and the Spirit. You cannot believe unless the Holy Spirit works in you through the blessings of the Means of Grace. Through the Word and the Sacraments, the Spirit gives you the power to believe the unbelievable. You are given the power to see beyond human logic and trust in the love that the Father had for you that caused Him to send His only Son and also then gave you the power to believe, to trust completely in Jesus alone for your salvation. He gives you the power to turn away from your own accomplishments and effort as the cause of your salvation and look to Jesus' blood and His righteousness for your only hope of eternal life.

Certainly good works have a place in our religious lives and our relationship to God but not as the cause of our place in His Kingdom. They are the result of God's authorship of our salvation. We love because He first loved us and gave Himself for us.

Nicodemus certainly was an unusual and interesting character in the Gospels. It was in this unusual nighttime encounter that we have been given the most concise message of the Good

News. Jesus makes it so simple. May it be a simple message that you can carry out into the daytime and nighttime encounters with the unusual and interesting people in your life who need to know the truth of the Gospel. Amen.

And the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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